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ABSTRACT

This document examines the abolition of the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) and the establishment of the Chinese State Education Commission (SEC) in June 18, 1985. First, an organizational analysis of the history and organization, the administrative tools, and the functions and dysfunction of the former MOE is presented. Second, a discussion of the establishment of the SEC includes an examination of the three distinct differences between the SEC and the former MOE: (1) an increase in power and responsibilities; (2) a stronger central educational administration; and (3) a clearer outline of goals and tasks. Finally, the prospects for future reform in the areas of organization structure, power distribution, administrative principles, staff quality, and administrator supervision are assessed. (22 references) (SI)

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CENTRAL EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION IN CHINA

AN ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS

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Paper presented at the
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Comparative and International Society

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On June 18, 1985, the 11th Plenary of the Standing Committee of the People's Congress in China passed a resolution on the abolition of the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the establishment of the State Education Commission (SEC). Why did China make this change in its central educational administration? What are the consequences of this reform? Has this reorganization created a strong leading body for the current educational reform in China? An organizational analysis of the history and organization, the administrative tools, and the functions and dysfunctions of the former MOE will provide answers to these questions.

History and Organization

To understand the history and organization of the former MOE, it is imperative, first of all, to comprehend the value system, politics and ideologies in the larger Chinese society. In his sociological theory of organization, Talcott Parsons (1956) suggests that the main point of reference for analysing the structure of any social system is its value pattern, which legitimates the organization's goals and guides the activities of participant individuals. This approach is particularly useful when applied to the analysis of organizations in China, where social orders and social systems are built on a set of distinct values, political principles and disciplines, and official ideologies.

Socialist China's values are expressed in an ideology based upon the ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao Zedong. They reflect both a commitment to universal norms and goals derived from Marxism, and a specific application of these over-arching concepts to conditions in China. In the earlier years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, Mao urged all organizations,

especially educational institutions, to shoulder their responsibilities in ideological and political work. Therefore, the primary aim of education in China is to serve the needs of politics, to transform the students ideologically, and to enable everyone who receives an education to develop morally, intellectually, and physically and become a well-educated worker imbued with socialist consciousness.

In addition, the organizational structure of education in China is deeply nested within the Chinese Communist Party, which is the core of leadership of the whole Chinese people. Hence, educational administration at all levels in China strictly adheres to the disciplines of the Communist Party, namely, the individual is subordinate to the organization; the minority is subordinate to the majority; the lower level is subordinate to the higher level; and the entire membership is subordinate to the Central Committee (Mao, 1938).

The formation and evolution of the former MOE was a faithful reflection of China's political ideologies and disciplines. Unlike in the United States where the Constitution contains no mention of the federal government's policy-making role in education, the legislative powers are all vested in the central authorities in China. Therefore, it was necessary to establish the MOE as the highest level of organization in education administration shortly after the birth of New China in 1949. The Ministry went through several reorganizations in the 1950s and 60s as a result of the government's effort to combat bureaucracy, and to centralize decision-making power. Then, the Ministry ceased to function and remained paralyzed for eight years during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The MOE was reestablished in 1975 and further consolidated in 1977. Figure 1 is an organization chart of the Ministry of Education in 1977.

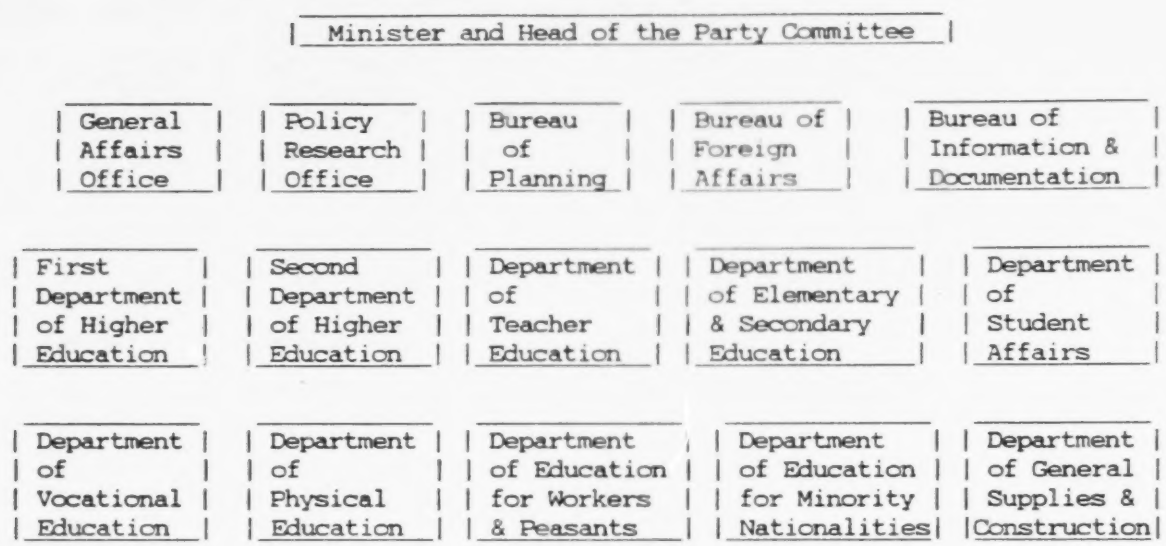
Minister and Head of the Party Committee
General Affairs Office
Policy Research Office
Bureau of Planning
Bureau of Foreign Affairs
Bureau of Information & Documentation
First Department of Higher Education
Second Department of Higher Education
Department of Teacher Education
Department of Elementary & Secondary Education
Department of Student Affairs
Department of Vocational Education
Department of Physical Education
Department of Education for Workers & Peasants
Department of Education for Minority Nationalities
Department of General Supplies & Construction

Figure 1: Organization of the Ministry of Education in China (1977)

The Ministry directly reported to the State Council and received its budget through the State Planning Commission. Under each of the 15 Offices, Bureaus, and Departments within the Ministry, there were divisions performing various duties. The staff totaled about 700. It was a very tightly coupled system, with directives flowing from the top down and with each level obeying and reporting to the level immediately above it.

Although our ideologies and disciplines are different from those in the West, I find that most organizations in China including the former MOE demonstrate almost all the characteristics of bureaucracy described by Western organization theorists Katz(1971) and Weber (1946): large size, specialization of work; authority residing in the office, not in the person; centralization of control with authority hierarchically distributed; division of labor based upon differentiated functions; rules and regulations to govern operations; a separation of personal from official property and rights; and an increasing tendency

of selection of personnel on the basis of technical qualifications. For Weber (1947), bureaucracy could be the most efficient form of organization. But Benveniste (1977) argues that bureaucracy is probably the number one issue in education. Actually, bureaucracy is not a new phenomenon in China. The ancient imperial system was very advanced although it had not developed a full bureaucracy in Weber's sense. Parsons (1966) observes that the classical Chinese administrative system was the mainstay of an imposing socio-political structure which was without peer in scale, stability, and durability until the truly modern era. Obviously, the Chinese, as the Westerners, are aware of the fact that "bureaucracies are powerful institutions which greatly enhance potential capacities for good or for evil, because they are neutral instruments of rational administration on a large scale" (Blau, 1956:4).

In fact, to a certain extent, the Chinese social structure is more hierarchical and bureaucratic than that in some Western countries, for China has always been a highly centralized country with a large population and vast land. American educators who visited China were often impressed by the Chinese practice of decision-making by rules and standardized criteria, within a system that is more structured than any in the U. S. The Chinese people in tradition adore grand-scale organizations and ceremonies and obey orders from their superiors with few questions. It is true that in all societies, the great state and the mass party are the classic soil for bureaucratization (Weber, 1946). Combating bureaucracy within the Party and the administrative organizations has always been a major concern in China.

Administrative Tools

The administrative tools employed by the former MOE and other government organizations in China are in many cases similar to those used in state organs

in the West. For instance, in our administrative practices, we generally resort to all of the five techniques described by Henri Fayol (1937): general survey; plan of operations; reports of proceedings; minutes of conferences between heads of departments; and organization chart. In addition, we also employ another three unique mechanisms that are not present in Western central administration, they are the principles of the mass line, democratic centralism, and collective leadership.

In China, the application of the mass line is Mao's method for developing a form of leadership that does not bare itself upon the power of an elite group of Party members but rather converts that power into authority by eliciting the support of the masses. All correct leadership is necessarily "from the masses, to the masses" (Mao, 1943). The mass line is not only an important link between the Party and the masses but also between the higher levels of administration and the cadres at the grass-roots levels. Administrators at the grass-roots levels are expected to provide feedbacks to and exert influence and control over the higher levels through the mass line.

Our second mechanism is democratic centralism. It is stipulated in our Constitution that the organs of the state must practise democratic centralism. Mao (1957) believes that within the ranks of the people, democracy is correlative with centralism and freedom with discipline. They are the two opposites of a single entity, contradictory as well as united. Thus, he promoted a system of democratic centralism, under which people can enjoy extensive democracy and freedom, but at the same time they have to keep within the bounds of socialist discipline.

The third important base for decision-making in China is the principle of collective leadership. It refers to the interaction and relationships among members within a specific unit. This means that the Party believes that many

heads are better than one and that decisions are likely to be more appropriate if they are based upon the experience and the wisdom of the collective.

Apparently, the three administrative principles assure certain unity and flexibility in the high-level state organs such as the MOE. However, as we shall see from the following analysis, at times circumstances and conditions have conspired to undermine the application of these and other administrative tools and caused dysfuntions in China's educational administration.

Functions and Dysfunctions

From Figure 1, we already saw that the MOE was a very rational and tightly coupled system. It was set up to rationalize China's educational system from the top down. Figure 2: Educational Administration in China illustrates the direction of this rationalization.

There has always been a tension between centralization and decentralization in China's educational administration. In a big country like China, local conditions vary greatly from place to place. Although our Constitution vests legislative powers in the central authorities, the central state organs should limit themselves to the functions of making general and key policies, coordinating local efforts, and allocating resources, and allow the local authorities to work out rules and regulations for local practices and development in light of their own conditions. However, many leaders and staff members in China's central government agencies interprete centralization as taking into their own hands all, or as much as possible, of the administrative power. As a result, the state organs often waste much time working out the last details for a local unit, while those who work at the lower-levels of administration become increasingly reliant upon the flow of authority from above. Taking care of all

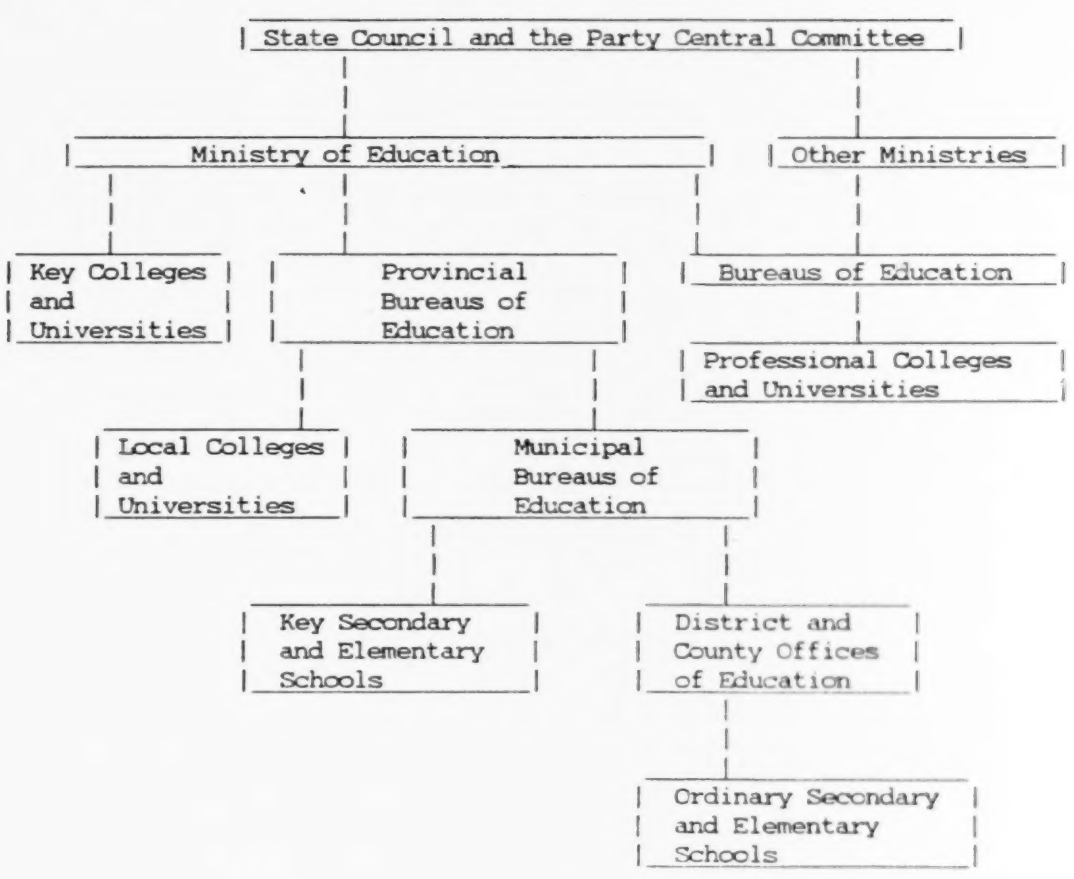
State Council and the Party Central Committee
Ministry of Education
Other Ministries
Key Colleges and Universities
Provincial Bureaus of Education
Bureaus of Education
Professional Colleges and Universities
Local Colleges and Universities
Municipal Bureaus of Education
Key Secondary and Elementary Schools
District and County Offices of Education
Ordinary Secondary and Elementary Schools

Figure 2: Educational Administration in China (1977-1985)

often results in taking care of none well. And simply following orders can lead to terrible consequences.

Mao realized in 1953 that "centralization and decentralization are in constant contradiction with each other." However, he did not recognize the problem of too much central control in China and the fact that as tasks become more complex in modern societies, decentralized nets are usually superior to centralized structures (Scott, 1981). Nor did he figure out the optimum proportion of centralization vs. decentralization for China's unique social system. Although Mao established the principles of the mass line, democratic centralism,

and collective leadership, in practice the state organs often violate these principles by emphasizing centralism to the extreme so that there was little room for democracy, and by giving orders "to the masses" without constantly gathering ideas and feedbacks "from the masses." In the end, educational administration in China became a linear, top-down, and oftentimes incomplete learning process:

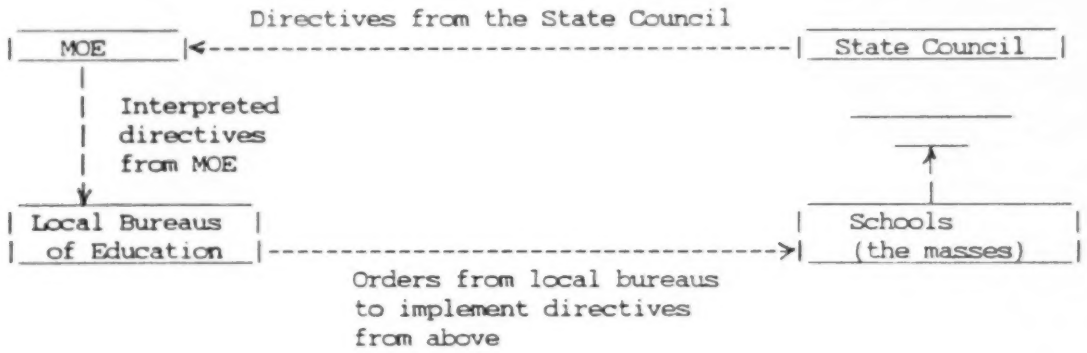
Directives from the State Council
MOE
State Council
Interpreted directives from MOE
Local Bureaus of Education
Schools (the masses)
Orders from local bureaus to implement directives from above

Figure 3: An Incomplete Learning Process

Essentially, this implies a highly rational model of educational administration: only those who are at the top-level posts have the decision-making power while those at the lower levels merely function as tools for interpreting and transferring directives from the top levels. The majority of the educational administrators in China, therefore, spend much more time interpreting directives from above than innovating policies and methods of educational reform. Both consciously and unconsciously they have helped to remove the decision centers farther away from the masses. Reorganization of the structure of educational administration and decentralization of power to local units thus became an urgent task in China's educational reform.

The centralized and rational pattern of educational administration in China

also resulted in some problems within the MOE. As many staff members interpreted centralization as taking more and more decision-making powers into their own hands, the apparatus of the MOE became bloated and overbureaucratized. It had to devote a disproportionate amount of its staff resources to administration. By 1985, the MOE had doubled its staff since its reestablishment in 1975. Every department and division in the Ministry wanted to grow bigger, and a great number of personnel had to engage in the daily office work of a maintenance nature.

Like in the Western World, accompanying the increased bureaucracy, there is a growth in the power of public officials (Weber, 1946). Although many MOE officials were determined to be humble and honest public servants, there were serious problems of bureaucratic excesses, red tapes, arrogant and impersonal manners and careless working styles. Sometimes it became very difficult for persons from lower-level educational institutions to get satisfactory receptions and services from the MOE officials. Combating bureaucratic working style and streamlining the central government organizations became a major task in China long time ago (Mao, 1953), but it has run into great difficulties, partly because our highly centralized system often easily leads to, rather than hinder the expansion of bureaucracy.

Schmidt (1979), an American educator, comments that China has an educational structure more formal, more ordered, and less open to informal influences than that of the typical bureaucracy in the U. S. This is perhaps a very superficial observation. In China, as in the Western countries, there are informal organizations related to formal organizations everywhere (Barnard, 1938). And like in the West, these informal relationships may either facilitate or impede purposive cooperation and communication (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939).

What is different is that in the Western countries, many organizations

discourage the development of positive sentiments among their members for fear that such emotional ties will undermine discipline and judgment and will interfere with attempts to deploy participants rationally (Scott, 1981), while in China, organizations generally encourage people to develop positive sentiments and friendship among their colleagues and to care for each other, love and help each other both in and outside of the work settings. There are both advantages and disadvantages in the Chinese approach. On the one hand, it fosters a more humanistic and friendlier atmosphere for people to work in, and create conditions that can buttress the formal organization. On the other hand, it may breed unhealthy contacts and groupings. Although the Chinese Communist Party has devised the mechnism of "criticism and self-criticism" to overcome these tendencies, and has repeatedly called the cadres to proceed in all cases from the interests of the people and not from one's self-interest or from the interests of a small group (See detailed discussions on this topic in Mao, 1945), some detrimental cliques and harmful unofficial norms stubbornly exist inside the Party and the state organs. The MOE was one of the oldest ministries in the central government, thus it had some very complicated informal groupings within the system, which constantly interfered with its normal functions. The old problems could hardly be resolved within the old system. Thus, it became obvious that there was the need to reorganize the central educational administration agency in order to break up the troublesome informal ties and bonds.

About two decades ago, the shrewd Western scholar Charles Perrow (1970) observed that "apparent leadership problems are often problems of organizational structure, instead. Sometimes inappropriate people are misplaced in leadership roles. But it is equally possible to design a leadership role for which it will be hard to find any appropriate person. The real problem may lie in the structure of the organization rather than in the characteristics of the people who

head it" (p. 10). Today, the open-minded and reform-oriented Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (1984) also sees that "although the various mistakes that we have made in the past are related to the ideas and styles of some leaders, the roots of the problem lie deep in the structure of our organization and work" (p. 293). For too long, we have been content with just making moderate changes in our organization and work while leaving the roots of the problem intact. In order to succeed in our modernization efforts, we can no longer ignore the need for structural reform in all aspects of our work. The abolition of the former MOE in 1985 can be seen as the first significant step towards structural reform in China's central educational administration.

Establishment of the SEC: the Same but Different

With the abolition of the former MOE and the establishment of the State Education Commission (SEC), one would assume that China's central educational administration is now much different from that in the past. However, in reality, the SEC has taken over most of the old structure, personnel, as well as the working style of the former MOE. Therefore, the abolition of the MOE was not the end of our problems, but only the beginning of new struggles with old problems.

Nevertheless, there are three distinct differences between the SEC and the former MOE (Yang, 1985). First, the SEC has more power and responsibilities than the former MOE. From Figure 2, we can see that in China, professional colleges and universities are under the direct control of their respective ministries. For example, medical colleges are under the Ministry of Health, and engineering institutes are under the various ministries of industry. Since these ministries were at the same power level as the former MOE, none of them, nor their bureaus of education, were willing to listen to the orders from the

MOE or answer its calls for coordination. However, in a highly centralized country like China, reform in education can be very difficult without a powerful and able central agency to plan and coordinate the overall development. That is perhaps one of the chief reasons why during the current reform and modernization movement in China, progress in educational field has been much slower than that in the fields of economy and science and technology. The latter two fields have state commissions as the highest policy-making bodies, which are half a level higher than the ministries in China's administrative hierarchy. Hence there arose the need to follow their examples to set up a state commission for education. Now, the SEC is responsible for the educational work all over China except military schools.

The second difference pertains to the leadership of the central educational administration. The leading body of the SEC is much stronger than that in the former MOE. Vice-Premier Li Peng, a well-known pragmatic leader in the central government was the Chairman of the Commission for the past two years, and recently State Councilor Li Tieying, a less well-known, but firm believer in reform and modernization, became the new chairman. It is the first time in the history of education since the establishment of the PRC that the central government appointed persons with high positions in the State Council in the highest command of the country's educational system. This was hailed as a decision of strategic importance (Yang, 1985). It demonstrates the central government's special attention to education and has helped raise the status of education work in the Chinese society. In addition, the State Council has appointed several noted educational administrators and scholars as the vice-chairmen and consultants for the Commission.

Thirdly, in contrast to the former MOE which lacked clear goals for its work, the SEC immediately outlined its goals and tasks: "formulating the guiding

principles of education, planning the progress of educational undertakings, coordinating the educational work of different departments, and arranging and guiding the educational reform in a unified way" (Wang, 1985). It was expected that the focus of its work would gradually be shifted from stressing micro-management to macro-management.

Moreover, there were also some changes in the organization of the central educational administrative body. Figure 4 shows the current organization of the SEC. It seems that the SEC has grown even bigger than the former MOE. There are also more staff members in the SEC--the number is 1,200 now as compared with 700 in 1985. But just as "bigness" does not always mean superiority over "smallness," new faces does not necessarily guarantee new practices. In fact, it is much easier for new comers to be socialized into the established norms and working styles than for them to create new ways in an established organization.

Prospects for the Future

Three years have passed since the abolition of the MOE and the establishment of the SEC, it is time for China's central educational administrators to review their progress and to contemplate the prospects for the future. In my opinion, there are at least five areas in our central educational administration that urgently need reform.

First, the structure of our organization and work. Although the establishment of the SEC brought about some structural changes in the central administration, quite a number of the existing bureaus, offices and centers of the SEC are performing tasks not directly related to the central missions of the SEC. Therefore, they should be removed from the organization of the SEC. For

Chairman and Vice-Chairmen of the SEC
General Affairs Office
Bureau of Planning
Bureau of Foreign Affairs
Department of Student Affairs
First Department of Higher Education (Social Sciences Education Research Center)
Policy Research Office (National Educational Development and Policy Research Center)
Bureau of Science and Technology Information (Science and Technology Information and Resources Center)
Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Secondary School Curriculum Research Center)
Second Department of Higher Education
Department of Teacher Education
Department of Physical Education
Department of Vocational Education
Third Department of Higher Education
Department of Education for Minority Nationalities
Department of Graduate Studies
Bureau for the Affairs of Retired Cadres
Computer Center for the SEC
National Educational Testing Center
Office for World Bank Loan Affairs
Department of General Supplies and Construction

Figure 4: Organization of the State Education Commission in China (1985-1988)

instance, Educational Testing Center, Secondary School Curriculum Research Center, and Social Sciences Education Research Center can be separated from the SEC and become inde-pendent, non-governmental, and non-profit organizations themselves. The Bureau for the Affairs of Retired Cadres can also be turned into an independent service agency, perhaps in the form of a club or an association. In addition, concerted efforts should be made to break the unhealthy cliques and groupings that originated in the former MOE and still exist in cer-

tain sections of the SEC. Incompetent cadres should be removed from their offices and placed in other suitable job positions. No more excuses and face-savings, for we need able and responsible persons to serve at the very top of our educational administration system. We simply cannot afford to keep those who are used to eat from "the big pot," namely, those who are used to getting the same pay for doing much less than the others.

Second, the distribution of power in educational administration. The key word here is decentralization. The former MOE exercised too much rigid control over schools, especially over universities and colleges, in the areas of personnel affairs, funding, student enrolment and job assignment, capital construction and academic exchanges with foreign schools, leaving school authorities little say in all these matters. Such tight controls dampened the enthusiasm of local educational administration to run their own schools. In the past three years, although the SEC has made some efforts in delegating greater decision-making powers to provincial, municipal, and autonomous regional governments as well as to major universities across the country, it still holds tremendous powers in its own hands. Lessons from American educational reform show that necessary reconstruction of schooling must take place from the "bottom up," not "the top down" (Goodlad, 1984). Teachers and educational administrators at the grass-roots levels, rather than policy makers at the top, are therefore the key forces in educational reform. Without them, policies and plans made at the top are only pies in the sky.

The third area in need of reform is the application of the three administrative priniciples. The mass line, democratic centralism, and collective leadership have approved themselves to be very useful administrative tools in the past, especially during the earlier years of the Chinese Revolution. However, the linear and top-down model of educational administration in China

has to a certain degree turned the application of these principles into an incomplete learning process, as is shown by Figure 3. Ideally, a democratic administrative model of "from the masses, to the masses" should be like this:

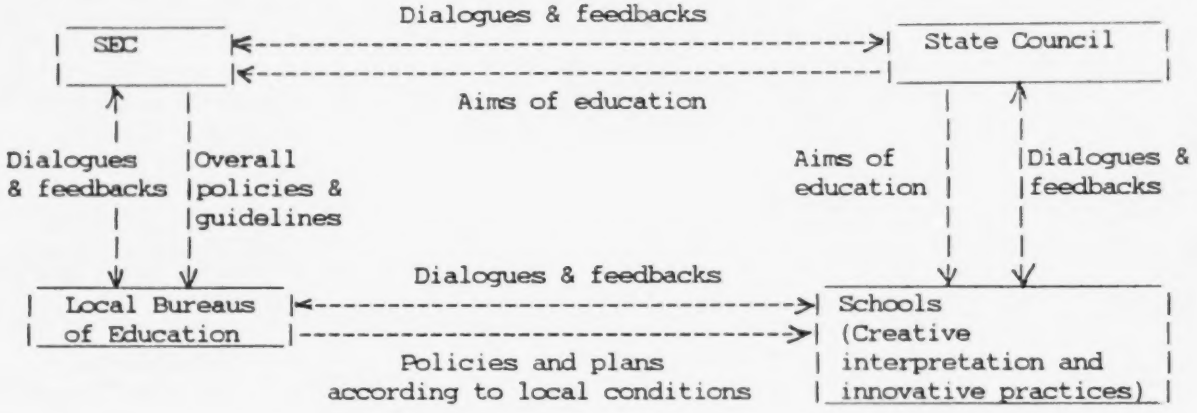

Figure 5: A Complete Learning Process

Such a model ensures a never-ending learning process. It requires broadly defined but clear goals for each level in the administration, decentralization of policy-making powers to a considerable degree, promotion of democracy, and development of genuine understanding of the ideas and feedbacks from the lower levels. Modern research techniques, computers, various information-gathering personnel and devices can be used to facilitate this process. It is important that our leaders and policy-makers learn what the masses really think and feel, not just what they would say in official meetings and discussions. This requires them to go down to the grass-roots levels on a regular basis, visit the masses, befriend the masses, listen to their complaints, and show real concerns for the welfare of the masses.

Fourth, the quality of staff members. China had had no formal training programs for educational administrators until very recently. Consequently,

nearly all of the staff members in the SEC have no idea or knowledge with regard to theories in educational administration. There is an urgent need to establish both pre-service and in-service training programs for our educational administrators. Besides decision-making and organization theories, our cadres should learn the basic skills in educational research and the trend in modern educational technology. The hope is to socialize our self-disciplined cadres into the role of reflective and creative educational administrators. In Britain and in some states in the U. S., persons who work for departments or commissions of education are required to pass civil service examinations. Although I do not like the idea of testing because test scores often lead to lopsided interpretations, I do believe that this kind of exams can screen out those who lack the basic knowledge and skills to be an administrator.

The final area of concern is the supervision of educational administration. In China, both educational policy making and policy implementation are carried out by the same administrative organizations--the SECs at the central and local levels. The advantage of such a system is that once a good policy is made, it can be effectively implemented throughout the country. Yet the danger is equally great. If a bad policy is made, our whole educational system will suffer. We need an organization or a group of experts whose sole task is to supervise the work of educational administration, especially that at the central level, so as to prevent them from making grave mistakes.

Concluding Note

To summarize, educational administration in China has followed a linear, top-down, and rational model, which has both advantages and disadvantages. The abolition of the MOE signified an answer to the call for structural reform from

the Central government and the larger society. And the establishment of the SEC has created new hopes as well as challenges to old problems.

To meet the needs of modernization, central educational administrators in China must engage themselves in a continuing process of inquiry and reform. There are at least five areas in need of their immediate attention: the structure of their organization and work; the distribution of power; the application of the three administrative principles; the quality of staff members; and the supervision of educational administration.

Finally, in studying educational policy, governance, and administration, we should recognize that any theoretical model is itself a somewhat arbitrary interpretation imposed on organized activity and any model involves trade-offs and unavoidable weaknesses. As long as we keep this in mind, we should feel free to apply models and perspectives from organization theories in our studies and make recommendations for reform.

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